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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (ADDED TAG)

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SUBJECT: IRAN: FRENCH COMMENTS ON DEALING WITH HOSTAGES

REF: PARIS 1046

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Kathleen H. Allegrone, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) SUMMARY: President Sarkozy's Strategic Affairs Advisor Franois Richier and MFA Middle East Director (A/S equivalent) Patrice Paoli told Political Minister Counselor in separate meetings August 11 that the French approached their hostage situations in Iran by first seeking an immediate, behind-the-scenes resolution before the Iranians brought charges against their captives, and then, once that approach failed, by adopting a two-pronged strategy: (1) relentlessly publicizing the cases with repeated employment of key words chosen carefully to put the Iranians on the defensive, and (2) constant exertion of diplomatic and political pressure, with the help of allies, in the form of regular demarches in Tehran and convocations of Iranian Ambassadors in European and Middle Eastern capitals. Paoli and Richier predicted that the Iranians will advise us, via the Swiss, to remain calm and quiet while waiting for Iranian legal procedures to move forward. Ignore this warning, they insisted, because silence will not expedite the process. They argued that USG statements and actions can sway and even mobilize public opinion within Iran. Whether or not we choose to speak out, they warned, the Iranians will energetically disseminate fabricated accusations. As the USG seeks to engage the Iranians, Richier predicted it will be difficult to determine which Iranian institution currently has control of American hostages and, more importantly, which one has the authority to decide their fate. The French still have not identified a key broker within the Iranian government with the power to resolve their own hostage cases.

¶2. (S) SUMMARY (CONT'D): Paoli and Richier also warned of possible Iranian efforts to blackmail the USG. They may try, for instance, to drag out the cases of the American and French hostages through the US/EU late September deadline for a response from the regime on the nuclear issue. Richier said the French believe this familiar Iranian tactic -- hostage-taking as political blackmail -- will only increase in the near future. The Iranians may also seek specific exchanges, such as the release from French custody of Majid Kakavand, an Iranian national whom the French arrested March 20 at Charles de Gaulle airport on the behalf of the U.S. Department of Justice on proliferation issues. Overall, as the USG prepares to handle its hostage cases, the French recommended we prepare for uncertainty. In the face of unpredictable Iranian behavior, Paoli and Richier said that constant pressure from foreign leaders and the media appears to be the only means to accelerate decision-making in Tehran. They also reported that the EU has no plans at the moment to recall its Ambassadors from Iran. END SUMMARY.

STEP 1: SEEK BEHIND-THE-SCENES RESOLUTION

¶ 13. (S) Franois Richier and Patrice Paoli told the Political Minister Counselor that each time they learned of the arrest of their citizens in Iran, the GOF sought their immediate release through discrete but direct contact with Iranian officials. (NOTE: Richier was accompanied by Mr. Lioutaud from the Office of French National Intelligence Coordinator, Bernard Bajolet (equivalent to our Director of National Intelligence). END NOTE.) They hoped to act quickly enough to prevent the regime from pressing formal charges. Once the Iranians refused to release the prisoners, Paoli said, the prosecutors publicized the charges and began preparations for a public trial. A trial seems to be a pre-condition for the release of foreign detainees in Iran, whom the French described as "hostages" held in order to achieve political goals.

STEP 2: USE THE MEDIA TO PUT IRANIANS ON DEFENSIVE

¶ 14. (S) Once the quiet approach failed, the French launched a relentless public relations strategy. They did not merely wait for questions from the press; instead, they made frequent pronouncements of their own about the hostages. They publicized the cases with repeated use of key words chosen carefully to put the regime on the defensive by influencing Iranian public opinion. Paoli and Richier emphasized the susceptibility of the Iranian population to messages sent through the media. USG public statements can sway and even mobilize public opinion within Iran, they claimed, especially in the post-election environment.

¶ 15. (S) In their statements, the French repeatedly employed key words to focus attention on the rights of detainees, and on Iranian legal commitments to respect those rights, such as "basic human rights," "good treatment," "Vienna Convention." They also used words to refute the regime's false accusations, like "innocent," "baseless," and "immediate release." Paoli said the French have deliberately avoided using the word "negotiation" when describing their contact with Iranian leaders: "We demand only their immediate liberation; we do not negotiate for the release of innocent civilians." (NOTE: Paoli said he strongly regretted the mistaken use of the word "negotiate" recently by a GOF spokesman. END NOTE.)

¶ 16. (S) Moreover, the French predicted that the Iranians will advise us, via the Swiss, to remain calm and quiet. They will imply that the cases will be resolved more quickly if we just wait for the Iranian legal procedures to move forward. Ignore this warning, Richier and Paoli insisted. "Be vocal," Richier advised, "even more so if the Iranians ask you not to be," because silence will not expedite the process. "They are the masters of stalling tactics," Paoli said. Whether or not we choose to remain silent about the cases, the Iranians will launch a media blitz. They will energetically disseminate fabricated accusations about their captives, Richier predicted. Paoli and Richier both acknowledged that an aggressive USG public posture involves risks as well, as it will "increase the value" of the hostages to Iranian leaders. Nonetheless, they said they still believe that public pressure, on balance, will prove more effective than behind-the-scenes engagement. Ideally, both public statements and private discussions can take place simultaneously.

STEP 3: CALL ON ALLIES (AND OTHERS) TO PRESSURE IRAN

¶ 17. (S) Paoli and Richier advocated the constant exertion of diplomatic and political pressure on the Iranian regime. Recognizing the central role of the wiss protecting power, they suggested the USG enlist the help of other allies as well, in the form of regular demarches in Tehran and convocations of Iranian leaders in capitals around the world. Paoli explicitly stated that France would be willing to weigh in, if asked. Richier explained that the French approached Syria almost immediately after they learned French

citizen Clotilde Reiss had been arrested on July 1. He then previewed the presidential communique about the release of the French Embassy employee, Nazak Afshar, in which the French explicitly thanked the Syrians for their help. "Of course we don't know if the Syrians did anything," Richier admitted, "but we wanted to thank them anyway. It should at least confuse the Iranians." He said the French did not/not reach out to Russia and China for assistance, but he and Paoli both argued that the support of EU and other countries had a major impact on Iranian leaders. The French have coordinated closely with the British, Richier said, though primarily on the ground in Tehran. He suggested the USG consider approaching other countries, including relatively disinterested allies such as Brazil, and ask them to lean on the Iranians. He also mentioned the potential impact of blogs written by Iranian ex-patriates in the U.S.

GOOD LUCK FIGURING OUT WHO IS IN CHARGE IN TEHRAN

¶8. (S) Richier predicted it will be difficult to determine which Iranian institution currently has control of the U.S. hostages and, more importantly, which one has the authority to decide their fate. The French still have not identified a key broker within the Iranian government with the power to resolve their own hostage cases. They learned that the deliberative procedures of Iranian institutions remain unusually opaque.

BE PREPARED FOR POLITICAL BLACKMAIL

¶9. (S) Richier said the Iranians have in the past tried to "blackmail" them, trading release of a French national for an Iranian national. He warned of possible Iranian efforts to blackmail the USG. The Iranians may try, for instance, to drag out the cases of the American and French hostages through the US/EU late September deadline for a response from the regime on the nuclear issue. Richier said the French believe this familiar Iranian tactic -- hostage-taking as political blackmail -- will only increase in the near future.

¶10. (S) The Iranians may also seek specific exchanges, such as the release from French custody of Majid Kakavand. Without going into details, Richier said Kakavand had been apprehended by the French and was under a U.S. extradition request. He noted that GOF officials had briefed President Sarkozy on this case and that the French are prepared to continue holding him. (Background from Embassy Justice Attache: Kakavand is an Iranian national whom the French arrested March 20 at Charles de Gaulle airport on behalf of the Department of Justice for extradition to the U.S. on export control (proliferation) charges.) Then again, Richier noted, it is possible that the Iranian agency or agencies holding American citizens may not be aware of Kakavand, or may have no interest in his release; it is simply impossible to predict how their bureaucracies will behave.

¶11. (S) Paoli said the French knew the Iranians intended to use the arrest of Clotilde Reiss and Nazak Afshar as a means to punish the French for their criticism of Iran's recent election results. More importantly, the Iranians hoped to muzzle future French criticism: "They want to paralyze us," Paoli said, explaining that the Iranians had failed in this attempt. Of course, he added, the regime also wanted to use French and British hostages to validate their allegation that foreign agents organized the mass post-election protests. Paoli and Richier both reported that the Iranians continue to harass and intimidate the local employees of their Embassy in Tehran. They described the burden on resources required to respond to each arrest: "The time we have had to devote to this is absolutely ridiculous," Richier said.

ADAPT YOUR APPROACH FOR EACH HOSTAGE

¶12. (S) Before offering accounts of the French experience

with hostages in Iran, Richier and Paoli were both at pains to avoid offering any absolute advice. They noted significant differences in the cases of Stephane Lherbier, Reiss, Afshar, the Americans captured near the border with Kurdistan, and other U.S.-Iranian dual nationals currently in custody. Paoli said the French made a concerted, and successful, effort to keep the case of Stephane Lherbier "apolitical." (NOTE: Lherbier, a French fisherman arrested by the Iranians in 2006, spent almost a year in prison prior to his release in 2007. END NOTE.) Since the Iranians have already accused the French and British hostages of espionage, Paoli and Richier suggested the USG make strenuous efforts to distance those cases from the situation of the U.S. hikers currently in captivity. Moreover, in 2007, Iranian leaders did not perceive the French as negatively as they do now, which they said has further complicated the recent hostage cases. Richier and Paoli both warned that the USG must make every effort to dissuade the Iranians from politicizing the case of the American hikers; thus far, they noted, Iranian officials have not formally linked them to the case against opposition members and the British and French hostages. Richier reported that the French found the Iranian "system" to be "perverse and complex but stable" in 2006, when seeking the release of Lherbier. "Now it is still perverse and complex," Richier said, "but unstable, and this makes everything more difficult."

BRACE FOR UNCERTAINTY

¶13. (S) Paoli stressed in particular the uncertain and unpredictable nature of French dealings with Iran in hostage situations. There are no procedural certainties, and the timing of various steps appears arbitrary. Progress toward a trial could take months, depending on variables such as the political environment and the whims of key actors inside Iranian institutions. "Anything is possible and we know next to nothing," Paoli said, citing the recent arrest and quick release of a French citizen who told Iranian provincial police he was a researcher following the paths of the dinosaurs. In the face of this uncertainty, Paoli and Richier said that constant pressure from foreign leaders and the media appears to be the only means to accelerate decision-making in Iran.

¶14. (S) Paoli and Richier described their continuing uncertainty about the case of Clotilde Reiss. They both stopped short of confirming that she would soon be transferred from Evin prison to the French Embassy in Tehran, although they expressed strong optimism. Richier added that this step will require the GOF to pay the Iranians a large sum, to ensure that Reiss stays in the country pending further legal action against her (reftel). Richier would not say whether the French will permit the Iranians to take Reiss back to court, or to prison: "We're focused on our short-term objective right now -- getting her out of jail." He said that the French worry the Iranians could decide to arrest in the near future another one of the approximately 1,800 French citizens living in Iran.

EU HAS NO PLANS TO RECALL AMBASSADORS

¶15. (S) Paoli noted that the EU relations with Iran are extremely tense at the moment. He said the Iranians currently refuse to receive the Swedish Ambassador, even in his capacity as representative of the EU Presidency. Nonetheless, barring extreme actions by the Iranians, such as expulsion of one of the EU Ambassadors, Paoli predicted that the EU will not/not decide to withdraw its Ambassadors from Tehran. (NOTE: Deputy MFA Middle East Director (PDAS equivalent) Jean-Franois Paucelle provided background on this issue in an earlier meeting. He served as French Charge d'Affairs in Tehran in 1997, after the EU withdrew its Ambassadors to protest the assassination in Berlin, by Iranian government agents, of four members of the Iranian opposition-in-exile. European Embassies, after their Ambassadors had departed, soon learned that Iranian officials

refused to receive European Charges d'Affaires, and so all communication between EU members and Iran slowed down or halted altogether. The Europeans also realized that the politics of returning Ambassadors to Iran can become complex. Following the withdrawal of their Ambassadors at present, Paucelle said, the Europeans would need to determine ahead of time when and under what conditions they would return. Possible criteria range widely, from returning the Ambassadors after the regime changes, as a long-term deadline, to after the release of Clotilde Reiss, as the shortest possible window. In addition, after the EU decided to return its Ambassadors in 1997, the Iranians refused to allow some of them to return, in an attempt to sow division among EU members. This chastening experience, Paucelle said, continues to inform EU discussions about whether or not to recall their Ambassadors from Iran. END NOTE.)

¶16. (SBU) Post will continue to liaise with the GOF on hostage issues and update Washington offices as events unfold.
PEKALA